

INTRODUCTION

Lord, the people was all dancing, enjoying their life so high
Lord, the people was all dancing, enjoying their life so high
Just in a short while, the dance hall was full of fire.

—“The Death of Walter Barnes” by Baby Doo Caston

JOHN WESLEY WORK III

When a fire ripped through an April 23, 1940 social gathering in Natchez, Mississippi, two hundred citizens were burned alive, and many others were scarred for life. Among the dead were Walter Barnes and most of his orchestra, the Royal Creolians, who had been hired to play for the dance. The carnage was so great that the story garnered front page coverage from many mainstream newspapers across the country—despite the fact that segregation reigned and all the victims were African-Americans.

In Natchez, nearly 60 percent of the 16,000 residents were black, and few families went unscathed by the tragedy. Musicologist John Wesley Work III, a professor at Fisk University in Nashville, read the United Press wire story on the front page of the *Nashville Banner* (see Appendix 1). He considered the cultural ramifications of the event and wrote to the president of Fisk: “I would like very much to have the opportunity of collecting songs in that area next spring. At that time, the anniversary of that fire, there undoubtedly will be many folk expressions and memorials and I believe that research then would be fruitful.”¹

African-American vernacular music had not been collected until the nineteenth century, and then not scientifically. Professional minstrels—whites in blackface—were driven by commerce to learn songs and vocal and instrumental technique from slaves. Abolitionists and post-Civil War Freedmen’s Bureau workers, affected by the sentiments in the “Negro spiritual,” collected such songs and made early transcriptions. By the third decade of the twentieth century, collections by Henry Krehbiel, Natalie Curtis Burlin, Guy Johnson, and other whites enlarged the base of published African-American vernacular music. Academics and religious leaders had also taken an interest in vernacular song. Three such men were associated with Fisk University: the Work brothers—John II and Frederick—and Thomas Talley. Collections by John Work III’s father and uncle emphasized African-American religious expression, finding it a worthy representation of the race to white society. Professor Talley, in addition, collected game, dance, and children’s songs. John Work III followed his father, uncle, and Talley but with a different empha-

sis. Work would not focus solely on song collection, as his predecessors, white and black, had done. Work was also interested in social context, performance practices (including instrumental accompaniment to songs, something usually ignored by previous collectors of African-American music), and song creation. The Natchez tragedy would be an opportunity to study all three.

Indeed Work's prediction was correct: the Natchez fire was quickly memorialized in song. Black musical groups cut several memorials to fallen comrade Barnes, including songs by Gene Gilmore, Baby Doo Caston, and the Lewis Bronzeville Five. More than a decade later, major blues artists recorded tales of the event—including Howling Wolf's "Natchez Burnin'" and John Lee Hooker's misdated "Disaster of '36." These, however, are the tributes by people far from the event, and Work was interested in how the community itself would commemorate such a tragedy.

John Work III came from a musical family. His grandfather, John Wesley Work, was born a slave in Kentucky in 1848.² First known as Little Johnny Grey, he was bought or leased by Colonel Work of Nashville, Tennessee. With his master, John Wesley spent some of his youth in New Orleans, where he attended rehearsals of the opera company, learned to read and write English and speak French, and developed his beautiful tenor singing voice. Sometime before the Civil War, upon his return to Nashville, John Wesley was asked to organize and train an African-American choir at Rev. Nelson Merry's First Baptist Church. The choir included three future members of the original Fisk Jubilee Singers.³

Fisk University was founded in January, 1866, in the immediate aftermath of slavery's abolition. The school's initial financial woes began to diminish when, in 1871, the Fisk Jubilee Singers began a fundraising tour. Response to their presentation of spirituals was so strong that Fisk could soon build Jubilee Hall, the South's first permanent structure built for the education of black students. Fisk always measured itself by the highest standards of American education, and its alumni include W.E.B. DuBois, the social critic and co-founder of the NAACP; writers James Weldon Johnson and Arna Bontemps; and Booker T. Washington was on its Board of Trustees. (Contemporary alumni include Thurgood Marshall, John Hope Franklin, and Nikki Giovanni.)

John Work's two sons, John Wesley II (b. 1872) and Frederick Jerome (b. 1879) were born in Nashville and attended Fisk. Upon being hired by the university in 1898, John Wesley II reorganized the Fisk Jubilee Singers, and thereafter taught history and Latin in addition to music. He led Fisk's male quartet, which recorded for Victor Records in 1909 and 1911, for Edison in 1912, and for Columbia Records in 1915 and 1916. His book *Folk Song of the American Negro* was published in 1915. Despite its title, the book uses only Negro spirituals as examples of black American music. It does, however, include in its text discussions of African song, American folk song, transmigration, character and peculiarity—all in all, fairly dense stuff. The book identified the Work family name with African-American vernacular music. It was an identity his son would not forsake.

John Work II suffered a heart condition, and collapsed at Nashville's Union Station as he

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John Work was a gifted composer and educator. One of the first African American academics to argue the value of African American folk music, he preserved this heritage both in his book, *American Negro Songs and Spirituals*, and through his work with the Fisk Jubilee Singers. c. 1950. Courtesy of Fisk University, Franklin Library, Special Collections.

was about to board the New York train on September 7, 1925. His wife Agnes held him in her arms as he died. John Wesley Work III, a student at the Institute of Musical Art (now Juilliard School of Music), brought his mother, sisters, and brother to New York to live after his father's death.⁴ Fisk soon reclaimed its own. The new university president, Thomas E. Jones, asked Agnes—herself an alto of some renown—to return to Nashville to train student singers. She had sung at Fisk as a student under Adam Spence and professionally as a member of F. J. Loudin's troupe which toured Britain in 1897–1898. By January 1927, she was again a valued member of the Fisk community. But tragedy struck the Work family the next month when Agnes suffered a fatal stroke while singing with a mixed octet in St. Louis.⁵

Shortly thereafter, John Work III was called to Fisk to assume his mother's duties and given a faculty appointment in the music department, teaching undergraduate composition. In 1932 he was awarded a Rosenwald Fellowship that he used to study music at Yale.⁶ He returned to Fisk in 1933. His work at Yale stimulated his interest in the roots of African-American music. Yale professor and friend George Herzog wrote in a letter dated November 19, 1935:

... glad to know more about your researches ... especially interested in your saying that you plan, in your present work, to take up the statement of collectors who have questioned the purity of Negro folk-song. That is a question which has interested me all along. Whatever the ultimate origin, African or not, of American Negro folk-song I personally believe little has survived from Africa, and that most of it grew on American soil. It is a distinct contribution of its own, and not a copy of European-American folk songs. It is here, I believe, that men of great scholarship like Guy B. Johnson and George Pullen Jackson may not see the problem in full perspective ... happy to know that *you who have so much more*

access to the material and a more intimate acquaintance with the background are interested in a similar approach.⁷ [emphasis added]

Herzog encouraged Work to study Negro folklore using principles of comparative musicology. Jeff Todd Titon, professor of music at Brown University, points out that Herzog

was the leading comparative musicologist in the USA then. Herzog, who was undertaking similar projects among American Indians in the 1930s, and publishing them in folklore journals, provided at least a model for Work. Field recording, musical transcription, and then comparison and interpretation based on musical analysis was the core of their enterprise, but comparative musicologists like Herzog in the United States and Constantin Brailiou in Eastern Europe were also paying attention to cultural contexts, noting down sociological as well as musical data. Developments in the academic fields of folklore, comparative musicology, and sociology were not the only influences upon Work's collection of Black folksong. Ideas of race, class, gender, and heritage, as well as the power of institutions, money, technology, and authority, all shaped the conceptions, collection, and presentation of American folk music between the Wars.⁸

Work's desire to study vernacular music in its social context—what would come to be called ethnomusicology decades later—meant that working solely in the ivory tower of Fisk's music building was too confining. He was preparing for field work.

Herzog was also interested in Work's growing collection of opportunistically gathered folk songs. By all accounts, Work had a fine ear and could scribble a lead sheet for most folk tunes on first hearing. Four- and eight-measure music manuscript fragments in the margins of later notebooks give evidence of this practice. No record of Work's early collection survives, though Herzog wrote, "Since you state that the size of the collection is such that publication of the whole is at the present difficult, it is evidently a collection that ought to be made known, even though only through a reference by number of melodies."⁹

Work also took advantage of the fact that Fisk, in the 1930s, functioned as a training ground for teachers from rural African-American school districts throughout Tennessee, Alabama, and Georgia. During the summer Educator's Sessions at Fisk, Work taught not only music education technique but also the value of vernacular music in schools. As a result, teachers from rural schools in the South became good sources and local contacts. Work's colleague at Fisk, chemistry professor Thomas W. Talley, had used such sources in compiling material for his 1922 book, *Negro Folk Rhymes (Wise and Otherwise)*.

In 1938, one of Work's rural contacts directed him to "Sacred Harp singing," an unusual form of music and social custom. As Work described it in *The Musical Quarterly* (January 1941):

My interest in this music was aroused in the summer of 1938 by Miss Ruby Ballard, supervisor of Negro Schools in Dale County, Alabama, who was in attendance at Fisk University. She described a musical activity, entirely new to me, which was deeply embedded in

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John Work's first field recordings were of shape-note singers. Though he learned about the musical form from his students at Fisk University and though the research was in furtherance of his scholarly goals, he, himself, financed the trip to the Sacred Harp Singing Convention in Ozark, Alabama on September 24–25, 1938. Work is third from the left. Courtesy of Center for Popular Music, Middle Tennessee State University; John W. Work III Field Collection.

the culture of the section. She told how neighbors gathered in the evenings to sing; how birthdays, anniversaries, and holidays were celebrated principally in singing. Frequently music makers from the entire county gathered for a singing festival which might last from one to two days. Once a year singers from all the counties in the section would meet for two days. Early in September she wrote that the Alabama State Sacred Harp Singing Convention would meet in Ozark on the 24th and 25th of the month. Immediately I made plans to attend.

Work scrupulously describes the performance practices of the shape-note singers. However, one significant detail is missing from his article. He had returned to record the singing at a meeting at Dothan, Alabama, on November 28, 1938. It was his first effort at field recording.

Fisk owned a disc recorder, though based on aural evidence the institution did not have the funds to maintain the machine.¹⁰ Nor was it able to supply Work with sufficient recording blanks. In a letter to W. D. Wetherford of Fisk's Humanities Department, Work asked for use of a car, movie equipment, and sound equipment for a Sacred Harp project, stating "I have already

made three trips at my own expense.”¹¹ Work had been financing his own research; now he was beginning to search for institutional support.

In 1938, Work also presented the results of his private research. He delivered a talk titled “Negro Folk Music” as a part of Fisk’s annual Robinson Music Lecture Series.¹² Work addressed topics including spirituals, blues, and instrumental music, approaching them from a musical, historical, and sociological perspective. In discussing the influence of tradition on audience “attitude” (a sociological term, he noted), Work revealed the wide range of his musical experience as well as a well-honed sense of irony:

If I were to select the one singing occasion I have witnessed which received the most applause I would mention a program I attended in a large metropolitan center some nine years ago. Because of the deductions I am leading you to make, the occasion and place must remain nameless as must the performers. The occasion was highly cultural. An outstanding Negro soprano and pianist were on the program as well as our own Dr. James Weldon Johnson and an eminent professor from one of the country’s largest universities. Also on this program was a Negro quartet. Nine years of constant search for an adjective to describe the singing of that quartet have provided no more fitting one than “terrible.” The voices of the group were unusually poor. The harmony was of a particularly inferior grade. As an instance of this, the bass ignored a fundamental musical law observed rigidly by every musical unit—whether the bass instruments of a symphony orchestra, the bull-bass in a hill-billy band, or the bass in a barber shop quartet—that the bass must end on the tonic note. No matter how much wandering he might do in the body of the piece he obeys the fundamental urge to end on the tonic. The bass of this quartet did not end on “do.” He only wandered. He was typical of the other members. The quartet was supposed to sing two spirituals—“Good News the Chariot’s Coming” and “Steal Away to Jesus.” But this quartet with all its bad harmony and voices were forced by the most tumultuous applause to sing six songs before they were allowed to leave the stage. From the standpoint of applause they easily overshadowed all other personalities on the program. The reason for all this? The tradition that America likes to see four Negroes together—singing. The audience, if you would like to know, comprised over a thousand university people!

Not only did Work illustrate how the reception of a performance is shaped by audience expectation, but his view of the distinction between “authenticity,” or that which is genuine and grounded in practice (though perhaps unfamiliar) and “tradition,” or that with which we are familiar and accustomed, was even more pointed:

The Hall-Johnson Choir has established a tradition of performing the spirituals to which many influential important New Yorkers subscribe. When the Fisk Choir with its own established tradition of performing the spirituals went to New York in 1933, one of the prominent newspaper critics roundly scored it for not singing the spirituals as well and

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in the manner (what he meant was “tradition”) of the Hall-Johnson Choir. I am perfectly sure that if the Hall-Johnson Choir were to perform in Nashville, many Nashvillians would condemn it for not singing in the Fisk tradition. And yet, if it were possible to transport a chorus from some rural church in the deep South which could sing the spirituals in an authentic manner with the slow tempi, the ejaculatory style, and the absence of any graduations in dynamics to New York or Nashville, both places would find it uninteresting and disappointing. Authentic as it might be, it would not be traditional.

At the same lecture, Work discussed the blues, anticipating by more than a decade the “blues as poetry” literary model. Work also is the first academic trained in the European tradition to express appreciation for the purely musical values displayed in the accompaniments to blues song—an appreciation both evident and useful when transcribing the Coahoma field recordings four years later. From the 1938 lecture:

We have in the form of the blues an unexpected phrase balance. As distinguished from orthodox forms which balance phrase by phrase, designated by the terms “antecedent



One of John Work’s ongoing jobs at Fisk University was to teach music composition and theory to undergraduates. c. 1950. Credit: Fisk University, Franklin Library, Special Collections.

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phrase” and “consequent phrase,” the blues has two antecedent phrases balanced by one consequent phrase. The verse can illustrate this phrase balance easily. Let’s quote from a well-known blues:

When I was home the door was never closed
When I was home the door was never closed
Where my home is now the good Lord only knows.

You noticed that the second line was merely repetition. This is a feature. This repeated phrase has an important esthetic function in the form. It is definitely a tension factor making the third line, the release line, more welcome.

This word structure is simple enough but the music is infinitely more complex. There are still three lines but they are each different and have a preconceived harmonic basis. Practically every blues conforms to a rigid harmonic mold. This is supplied by an accompaniment which is usually very highly embellished and highly rhythmical. In no manner must this accompaniment be considered subordinate to the singer. It is just as important. Together they form an integral whole. Actually to many the accompaniment is the more interesting. In authentic performances no written music is ever used and the accompaniment resolves itself into improvisation which, in the hands of the better instrumentalists, becomes a demonstration of genuine skill and imagination.

For most of 1939 and 1940, bound to Fisk and Nashville, Work located and collected primarily from local musicians. Of the forty-one folk musicians listed in his notebooks, there exist audio samples of twenty-four.¹³

John Work, using Fisk’s recorder and dime-store recording blanks, was on his way to building a notable private collection of recorded Negro folk music. Call-and-response singing at a folk church in Pulaski, Tennessee; a South Carolina ex-convict singing a work song; the Alabama Sacred Harp; banjoist Ned Frazier and fiddler Frank Patterson singing and playing nineteenth-century dance tunes and minstrel songs; Jesse James “Preacher” Jefferson playing blues on the harmonica—these were the start of the collection Work envisioned. Classically trained, comfortable with theory, an accomplished composer, John Wesley Work III was asserting the importance of the self-taught musician, championing the authentic, the indigenous, the vernacular.

THE FISK-LIBRARY OF CONGRESS COAHOMA COUNTY STUDY

John Work’s interest in folk music sparked one of the earliest, most important, and comprehensive studies of a folk music culture in the United States. His intention to study the Natchez community became, ultimately, the Fisk-Library of Congress Coahoma County Study, a series of field trips during 1941 and 1942 that resulted in, among other things, the first recordings of blues

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musicians Muddy Waters, David “Honeyboy” Edwards, and Son House; recordings by several other musical greats including Sid Hemphill; and detailed documentation of a society.

A large-scale folk music study could not be financed with an assistant professor’s salary, so John Work again sought to enlist the university administration in his cause. On May 25, 1940, he formally introduced the idea of a complete folk music study in the first of three letters to Fisk University president Thomas Elsa Jones. Following Herzog’s methods, the study, Work explained, would include social context, performance practice, and repertoire provenance, and was to be carried out at Natchez, Mississippi, scene of the devastating fire the previous month.

Thomas Elsa Jones, a white Quaker, was president of Fisk from 1926 to 1946. Born in Indiana in 1888, he was educated at the Hartford Theological Seminary and Columbia University. At Fisk, he appointed African-Americans to positions of power and relaxed rules that had prohibited male and female students walking together on campus or from going downtown on their own time. Jones attracted many leading academics to the school faculty, which became two-thirds black by 1945.¹⁴ Despite Jones’s liberal policies, Work never developed a close personal relationship with the president.¹⁵ According to Work’s wife Edith, Work was “not comfortable” with President Jones, who, despite his record of recruiting and appointing blacks, passed over Work for advancement to positions he was well qualified to hold. Jones denied Work the opportunity to direct the Mozart Society (the university chorus) and three times passed him over for the chairmanship of the music department in favor of whites.¹⁶ This lack of rapport would profoundly affect the Coahoma study.

Within days of the Natchez proposal, Jones and Work met to discuss the project, and others from Fisk’s faculty were brought in. Harold Schmidt, chairman of the music department, often had spoken of a research branch for his department. Dr. Charles S. Johnson, famed head of Fisk’s social sciences department, was also in favor of an intensive study within a limited territory (Johnson had already led several such studies); he encouraged Work to include folk tales, religious practices, foodways, and occupational lore with his music study.

All the ideas were incorporated into a proposal Work sent to Jones on June 21, 1940. He explained that Natchez was selected because of April’s tragic fire: “To the abundance of folklore natural to the community, a new body of lore is due to be added. It is the ballads and music arising out of the holocaust of last April . . . the impact of this terrible fire with its religious implications on the minds and imagination of the unlettered Negroes of that region must of necessity be of such weight as to stimulate the creation of a tremendous amount of folk expression.”¹⁷

The excitement about capturing that “tremendous amount of folk expression” was growing. Five days later, after a meeting, Work wrote to Jones: “As you will recall, we mentioned the possibility of our tying up with the Library of Congress and its tremendous project in Americana folklore research. Both you and Dr. Weatherford [professor of religion and humanities] had a definite feeling that the Lomax people would be interested in seeing their materials put into use at such a place as Fisk University. It certainly would be to our advantage to have the opportunity to work with these American folklore collectors because of their wide experience in this field.”¹⁸

This note reveals how the Library of Congress—where Alan Lomax was employed—was brought into the project: Fisk was developing the study and needed a partner with greater re-

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sources. The Library was an obvious choice, and all the Fiskites were enthusiastic. The Library's participation was itself significant. Perhaps the study's greatest contribution was institutional validation of the African-American vernacular as a legitimate and important culture. To many African-Americans, secular music had long been considered not only a low art but also a sin. With few exceptions, Fisk and most of "Negro" academia had emphasized Eurocentric musical practices. As Lomax wrote a year later, "This marks the first occasion on which a great Negro university has officially dedicated itself to the study and publication of Negro folk-songs . . . [the study] will lay the basis, it is believed, for contemporary music history, for a new approach to the field of folk music, for a practical working knowledge of the musical life of people, which will be equally useful to scholars, professionals and administrators in the field."¹⁹

So it was that on June 29, 1940, President Jones wrote to Jackson Davis of the General Education Board, New York:

I am submitting herewith an appeal for a special grant to enable Mr. John W. Work, of Fisk University, to pursue studies on the Negro folk ballads in Natchez, Mississippi, and selected areas in the South.

Mr. Work is the son of the famous John W. Work who published one of the first volumes of Negro spirituals and directed the Fisk Jubilee Singers for many years. John Work, Jr. [John Wesley III was known as "Junior" at Fisk], was composing such as "The Tennessee Lullaby" and arranging Negro spirituals while he was yet in his teens.

He has published many choral numbers and arrangements of spirituals. He has just had accepted for publication by Simon, Howell & Co., a volume entitled "Negro Folk Music" which will be off the press in October.²⁰

Work's trip was already broadening; Natchez was one of the "selected areas" to which he would travel to document the role of music in the culture. The appeal also indicated that initial contact with the Library of Congress had been made:

It has already become evident that such a study would be of much interest to the Library of Congress, to John and Allen [sic] Lomax, and to others who have been working in this field. Exchanges of material, comparison of recordings and general collaboration between Fisk University and the Library of Congress have already been agreed upon in case the project can be carried out. In celebrating the 75th Anniversary of the founding of Fisk University, from May 1st through 8th, 1941, it is hoped to present, together with other American music, Negro ballads as they are being created today.²¹

The General Education Board declined the grant proposal, but the researchers were not deterred. Fisk enjoyed the validation brought by its association with the Library of Congress, as well as their superior equipment and resources. Meanwhile, Lomax hoped to work with Fisk's Charles S. Johnson, whose book *Shadow of the Plantation* (1934) was an impressive sociological portrait of a specific region.

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Johnson, in addition to directing Fisk's department of social sciences, was also author of *The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy* and *Statistical Atlas of Southern Counties*. A Virginia native (b. July 24, 1893), Johnson earned his Ph.B. at the University of Chicago in 1917 and was a World War I veteran. After the Chicago race riot of 1919, Johnson was appointed executive secretary of the Commission on Race Relations by the governor of Illinois. When the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial Trust endowed Fisk with funds to create a social research program in 1927, Johnson was lured to Nashville. By the mid-1930s, he was the African-American superstar in the social sciences, becoming the first black trustee of the Julius Rosenwald Fund in 1934 and the first black elected vice-president of the American Sociological Society in 1937. In 1946, he would succeed T. E. Jones and become the first black president of Fisk. Johnson was the scholarly power through whom Lomax might gain credibility in academic circles.²²

Aiding Johnson at Fisk was Lewis Wade Jones, who would become an important player in the Fisk–Library of Congress Coahoma County Study and a contributing author to one of the project's manuscripts. Lewis Jones worked closely with Johnson as a research assistant, supervisor of field studies, and as a departmental instructor. Born in Cuero, Texas, on March 13, 1910, Jones, who was African-American, received his undergraduate degree from Fisk in 1931. He spent the next two years at the University of Chicago as a Social Science Research Council Fellow, returning to Fisk at the end of 1932. He joined the military in 1943, then took a faculty position at the Tuskegee Institute School of Education; he stayed there until his death in 1979, at which time he was a professor of sociology and director of the Tuskegee Institute Rural Development Center. As the Coahoma project took shape, it became clear that Johnson would not be taking an active role; Lomax would be working in the field with Lewis Jones.

This development should have surprised no one. Johnson's survey method, beginning with *Shadow of the Plantation* in 1934, had been to create a questionnaire and then put assistants in the field. For the Coahoma study, he seems to have adapted social and statistical models used in 1938 and 1939 to gather the data that would be published in 1941 as *Growing Up in the Black Belt: Negro Youth in the Rural South*, arguably his most important book.

So, Johnson assumed an advisory role in the Coahoma study. His lack of direct participation and leadership was unfortunate for Work, to whom Johnson had been an ally and friend.²³ He'd been instrumental in securing the Rosenwald Foundation money that allowed the publication of Work's book *American Negro Songs and Spirituals* (1940). He would later appoint Work director of the Fisk Jubilee Singers (1947), and then chair of the music department (1951), making Work the first African-American in that position. The two were even neighbors in the faculty-occupied houses that lined the Fisk campus. Had Johnson assumed more control of the study, it seems likely that Work would have enjoyed a more active role in the fieldwork.

The next record of events is dated nearly a year after the General Education Board grant application. On April 29, 1941, Fisk opened a weeklong celebration of its seventy-fifth anniversary. That first night featured "A Program of Negro Folk Music: Blues, Ballads, Spirituals, and Work Songs by the Golden Gate Quartet and Josh White." The commentators were Sterling Brown from Howard University and Alan Lomax from the Library of Congress. Lomax prob-

ably attended Work's anniversary week program; Work began with praise for Lomax and Brown, and for their "program of Negro folk lore that surely must be regarded as one of the great cultural events in Fiskiana . . . So comprehensive was that concert and lecture that this program can hardly be more than an echo of it."²⁴ Aided by fiddler Frank Patterson, guitarist Ford Britton, and banjoist Nathan Frazier, all local amateurs, Work set out "to establish the thesis that in each of your communities there is an abundance of significant folk lore of which you have been generally unaware but which can easily be discovered and usually made available for the community's appreciation and education."²⁵ Despite his humble appraisal, Work's program must have had an inherent strength comparable to the professionalism of Josh White and the Golden Gate Quartet. The field recordings Work made of the Frazier/Patterson duo (now in the Library of Congress Archive of Folk Culture and selectively issued on compact disc by Rounder Records in the U.S., and entirely by Document Records in the UK) are considered by scholars and musicians among the finest examples of black string band music.

Lomax's presence allowed face-to-face discussion of the field research project. Evidence of the meeting at Fisk is found in a letter from Lomax to President Jones dated July 1, 1941, and in a mid-September 1941 summary statement by Lomax. This meeting marks the beginning of a major change in the trip, a shift in the control of the project from John Work to Alan Lomax. In attendance were Charles S. Johnson, John Work, John Ross of the drama department,²⁶ President Jones, and Lomax. In the July letter, Lomax wrote from Washington D.C., "My report of the project discussed by us at our last conference in Dr. Johnson's office has been warmly received in the Library. I think that it would be best to carry out a survey of the type discussed in the Mississippi Delta Counties, and to help Dr. Work in his recording in Nashville and vicinity."²⁷

Work's response has not been located, but his attempt to regain control of his study can be gleaned from Lomax's July 30 letter:

Dear Mr. Work, I think you have gotten things rather mixed. When I was in Nashville, I discussed two separate projects; one, a survey project to be worked out with Dr. Johnson, and, two, a small recording project to be initiated in Nashville by yourself with your fiddlers and local singers at once. I am still very anxious that you begin work on this. (I thought that it might be possible eventually to extend this to include field work.) . . . I am in correspondence with Dr. Johnson about the survey recording project which we plan to initiate sometime in October. I hope to work with you in this connection also."²⁸

Had John Work been more highly valued by President Jones, had Charles S. Johnson been more personally present in the project, had Work himself been of a more aggressive nature²⁹—then the project's initiator might not have been told, in effect, "Don't call us, we'll call you." Even the palliative for Work's demotion—the Library of Congress would repair Fisk's recorder, allowing him to make better recordings on his field trips—came with a hitch. He would be required, in exchange, to donate twenty discs from his private collection for deposit with the Library. Not only was Work's vision being commandeered, so were his recordings.

Lomax's later account of the study's origin makes no mention of a project being conceived

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before his involvement. In *The Land Where the Blues Began*, he wrote: “It was clear that Southern blacks would not readily confide in a white folklorist. Therefore, I approached Fisk University [emphasis added], the Princeton of black colleges, with the idea of doing a joint field study with my department at the Library of Congress. The aim was to establish a center for black folklore studies at Fisk . . . Charles S. Johnson, head of sociology at Fisk, liked my notion of doing a study of an urbanizing cotton county as a way of accessing the continuing importance of traditions. For this reason we picked Coahoma County, the cotton capital of the Delta, as the site.”³⁰

Oddly, Lomax omits mention of Charles S. Johnson’s recently published *Growing Up in the Black Belt*, a study of Coahoma and seven other Southern counties. A chief point Johnson addressed was the modernizing influence of urbanization on plantation culture and the survival of traditions. Johnson may have welcomed, and even steered to the Delta, a folkloric addendum of his sociological survey, but Lomax’s claim of co-authorship seems overextended.

Lomax’s own correspondence reveals a less unilateral process than he would claim fifty years later. Three weeks before the initial outing to Coahoma County, Lomax wrote Johnson: “A number of people have suggested that southwestern Tennessee, which is slightly more stable than the Delta area, would be a better region for work than the one we have thought of already.”³¹ Even two days before the expedition was to begin, the team was making preparations to work in Ripley, Tennessee, and Carthage, Mississippi (which is in the hill country and not the Delta). On August 21, Lomax wrote Johnson: “I hope that by [August 25] Doctors Jones and Work will have consulted about revivals in Tennessee and Mississippi and will have a recording schedule laid out.”³² Also perplexing is that on the same day, Lomax revealed an altogether different plan to his superiors at the Library of Congress. “The purpose of this trip is . . . to record Negro revivals in the region of northwestern Mississippi”—referring to the Delta, not Carthage.

Work, probably finding Lomax’s planning too haphazard, resumed his own pursuit. His foremost interest was songs and musical styles, and Lomax’s trip—now conforming to his desire for scholarly validation—was becoming increasingly sociological.³³ Work may have feared that songs were being forsaken. He already knew that good material and social context would be found at an annual gospel revival in Ripley, and at a traditional fiddlers’ meet in Carthage. Having lost control of the original project, Work seems to have begun planning and fundraising for a new, separate expedition. On August 22, Work wrote to the Fisk comptroller requesting \$78.20 for a twelve-day trip to Ripley and Carthage. His budget does not include money for blank discs; that form of institutional support was to come through Lomax. By controlling the flow of blank discs, Lomax could prevent Work’s independent expedition.

Aware of Work’s plans, and possibly concerned with keeping Charles S. Johnson’s good will, Lomax mollified Work in a letter of August 23, making Work’s new trip seem the team’s primary interest. Writing from D. C., Lomax praised him for the 1938 Negro Sacred Harp songs that Lomax had just coaxed from Work for donation to the Library. He closed: “I shall see you the morning of the 25th, ready, I hope, for our trip to Ripley.” By inviting himself along, Lomax was subsuming Work’s new trip as he had the Natchez one.

On August 24, 1941, Alan Lomax arrived in Nashville. With him was his wife Elizabeth, who would assist him with the field recorder, which filled the back of their car. Lewis Jones and

John Ross from Fisk's drama department would have to travel separately. Arrangements were made for John Work to meet them in Clarksdale on the twenty-eighth, a Thursday. Before departing on that day, Work—holding steadfast to the potential of his vision—wrote a letter to President Jones outlining his plans for a separate recording project, also twofold. First, he wanted “to record and study unique or interesting folk activities; i.e. camp meetings, Revivals, barn dances, fiddler's meets, etc.” in nearby communities; as well, he was interested in “interviewing creative individuals in the various communities and recording their songs.” He also wrote, “Following his discussion with you, Mr. Alan Lomax has agreed to aid in these projects by supplying me with phonograph discs. I have just received a letter informing me of his sending me 50 of them this week.” In return, Lomax demanded, however, that the recordings Work would make on these discs be donated to the Library of Congress; he promised to make copies for Fisk (a promise unfulfilled).³⁴ In closing, Work revived his original idea for recording in Natchez, stating his desire for approval of the requested \$250 for the year's work, and “that this amount of money will permit a trip to Natchez, MS next Feb. I understand that these projects described are subordinate to the larger folk song project in which the Social Science Dept. and Mr. Lomax are collaborating, and in which I will also serve.” The good soldier, Work then marched out to the field.

For better or worse, the project was underway, with Lomax in charge. The plan was to begin with a preparatory week-long trip in August 1941, which was to be followed by a more in-depth trip several months later. Recordings were to be made both times. After the first visit by Lomax, Lewis Jones, Ross, and Work, Fisk dispatched two graduate students—Samuel C. Adams Jr. and Ulysses S. Young—to Coahoma County for the fall 1941 semester, allowing time for in-depth field research. During the short preliminary trip to the Delta, Jones and Ross seem to have been left to their own devices in surveying the plantation culture for future study. Lomax, as far as can be determined, did not supervise Lewis Jones as he did Work. Jones most likely reported directly to Charles S. Johnson at Fisk.

Lomax's summary of what had been Work's idea is compelling: “the agreed upon study was to explore objectively and exhaustively the musical habits of a single Negro community in the Delta, to find out and describe the function of music in the community, to ascertain the history of music in the community, and to document adequately the cultural and social backgrounds for music in the community.”³⁵ Coahoma County had a population of nearly 50,000 in 1940, but it boasted only one city, Clarksdale, with a population of 12,168.

As the Library of Congress guide to *The Library of Congress–Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection* states:

This project was the first racially mixed field study in the Deep South. Racial tension was high in the Delta at the time of the study, and cooperation was necessary. Fisk University needed the backing of the federal government in the form of the Library of Congress, while Alan Lomax needed the help of black scholars to overcome racial suspicion and to facilitate rapport with informants.

INTRODUCTION



Lewis Jones was an instructor in the Department of Social Sciences at Fisk University from 1932 to 1942, where he worked closely with Charles S. Johnson. In 1949 the two co-wrote *A Statistical Analysis of Southern Counties; Shifts in the Negro Population of Alabama*. After leaving Fisk, Jones moved to the Tuskegee Institute School of Education, where he was a professor of sociology. This photo comes from the 1958 Tuskegee University yearbook. Courtesy Tuskegee University Archives.

Rapport *did* exist between the informants—who were not all of the same socioeconomic class—and the academic blacks. Work, Jones, and Adams were all southern-born and living in the south under the same Jim Crow laws as the Mississippians, a fact not lost on the locals.³⁶

Work and Lomax worked from Friday August 29 through Wednesday, September 3, in Clarksdale, Hollandale, Stovall, Money, Mound Bayou, and Lake Cormorant. They recorded church services, spiritual singing, oral histories, and secular songs, including blues by Muddy Waters, Son House, and Willie Brown. But the only aural evidence of Work during that week is the instantaneous disc recordings of the project's most famous byproduct, McKinley Morganfield, aka Muddy Waters. Work conducts two of the four interviews with "Stovall's famous guitar picker." In the second, Lomax interrupts after several minutes, commandeering the questioning. In subsequent recordings, Lomax's is the only interviewer's voice heard.³⁷

John Work—a trained musician and a member of the ethnic group being studied—was kept from the heart of the project and, after the trip, retired to a room in the social sciences building at Fisk to transcribe the discs. From the enthusiasm in Work's voice and the relaxed responses of Muddy Waters in the few moments when Work has control of an interview, one can only wonder what may have been gathered had he been allowed to truly "facilitate rapport with informants."

As noble as an interracial team was, it was not without its own problems. Underlying conflicts become evident in these two perspectives on some of the participant's roles. Lomax wrote about Lewis Jones, who had picked cotton in rural Texas as a child: "No plantation boss could resist the sincere but respectful Prof. Jones (call me 'Looney' and I'd feel more at home) when he knocked at the back door and, hat in hand, asked them to help him in his study of the 'colored' problem. The toughest cracker overseers have confided their troubles and their secrets to Jones."³⁸ And Jones (as recounted by Lomax) perfectly understood the impossibility of the Fiskites doing this work without a white person's presence, and how that presence affected them: "Every Ne-

gro got to have his white man, his boss, to look after him when he get in trouble with the white world. Now I don't know about the rest of you, but this [Lomax] is *my* white man on this trip . . . We are registered in the minds of the authorities who control the destinies of everyone in Coahoma as Lomax's colored folks."³⁹

The 1941 Coahoma outing resulted in twenty-five sixteen-inch disc recordings, totaling approximately twelve hours. The material ranged from church services to blues to interviews. The experience familiarized the researchers with the issues of field recording, and allowed them to better prepare for their next recording trip. Lewis Jones returned almost immediately (September 9) to Clarksdale, and on his first evening he went to five juke joints and listed the songs he found on each club's jukebox. (See Appendix 5.) Jones was, at that point, laying groundwork for Fisk graduate students to work from September 25 to the end of October on the "socio-musical survey," and for Lomax and the Fiskites to return to Coahoma in late October or early November for two or three weeks to finish the study. Lomax wrote, "The records will then be brought to the Library, and copies sent to Fisk University for transcription and study by various members of the faculty. By the middle of December Dr. Johnson and I look forward to having the material well in hand for final editing . . . The projected field work will result in a study, jointly edited by Dr. Johnson and his assistants, and by Alan Lomax, which will be published under the sponsorship of Fisk University."⁴⁰ Five hundred and eighty dollars had been spent to date, with an anticipated total budget of \$1,947.90 (revised on October 2 to \$1,573.65).

Despite the expectation to return in six weeks, nearly a year would pass before the study was resumed. The first delay came on September 16, when Johnson wrote Lomax: "I have just had a long distance telephone call from Lewis Jones in Clarksdale, Mississippi . . . This is the most feverish year that the section has experienced so far as cotton picking is concerned . . . [Plantation owners] are urging that the actual recording that may require some time be done after November 1st. They said around November 15th."⁴¹ Jones wrote, "When we left here seventy-five cents a hundred was being paid for cotton picking, and today they are paying \$1.50. [Ultimately prices went to \$2.00, the highest since 1926.⁴²] People have quit their town jobs and gone to share in the first cotton prosperity in a long time." He had plans to do some picking of his own for the first time in sixteen years: "I hope I'll pick enough to pay for the overalls I'll have to buy. Talking with the pickers all day should yield some materials and some leads."⁴³

Meanwhile, Fisk held a training seminar over the weekend of September 20–22 "to acquaint the graduate students, who are to carry on the field work, with the field of Negro folk-song and its problems."⁴⁴ Two graduate students—Samuel Adams, from the Sociology Department, and Ulysses Young, a Fellow in Anthropology—then joined Lewis Jones in Coahoma County. Adams was researching his masters thesis, *Technology, Secularization, and the Rural Negro*, for which he was awarded a degree in 1947; Young, a fellow, would not have been required to submit one. The two coauthored the very informative "Report on Preliminary Work in Clarksdale, Mississippi." (See Appendix 3.) Adams later went on to become the U.S. ambassador to Niger.

By October, John Work and his student assistant Harry Wheeler were transcribing the recordings from the first trip. They created a laboratory of their own, allowing for the careful atten-

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After receiving his Master's Degree from Fisk University, Samuel C. Adams, Jr. attended the University of Chicago, where he received his PhD in 1953. He had a long and distinguished career in public service, highlighted by his appointment to the post of Ambassador to the Republic of Niger in 1968–1969. This photograph is from that time period. Courtesy of National Archives.

tion the transcriptions needed. The laboratory was given space in the sociology building, Charles S. Johnson's domain, rather than the music building. The lack of participation by the music department after the initial meetings attended by department chair Schmidt, a white man, is puzzling. Did Schmidt, like many trained in the Eurocentric canon, feel the subject unworthy? This viewpoint is still common in many university music departments.

Plans for the November 15 return were in place as late as October 29, when Johnson wrote Lomax about the continuing field work of Adams and Young: “[They have been] spending continuous time in Coahoma County, getting acquainted, working in the cotton fields, talking with persons, visiting churches, juke houses and pool rooms, etc. . . . I am having copies made of their field notes and interviews, and a copy will go to the Library of Congress [45] . . . Dr. [E. H.] Watkins [Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology] and Mr. Lewis Jones have spent two periods in Coahoma County since you left, and they are giving rather close supervision to the two field workers.”⁴⁶

The November return was finally put off, due to a combination of events—mainly the weather and, for Lomax, other pressing work in Washington. Then, in December, Pearl Harbor was attacked. In a January 1942 letter to Lewis Jones, Lomax recounted his recent suggestion to Johnson that they terminate the Coahoma study: “possibly the study we had outlined was a bit utopian in the situation of the present crisis, and asking [Dr. Johnson] whether he thought so, and wondering whether we had better tackle some other job at this moment . . . I'd like very much to spend the money which has been set aside for this project for some sort of meaningful study which would be carried on in collaboration with Fisk University.”⁴⁷

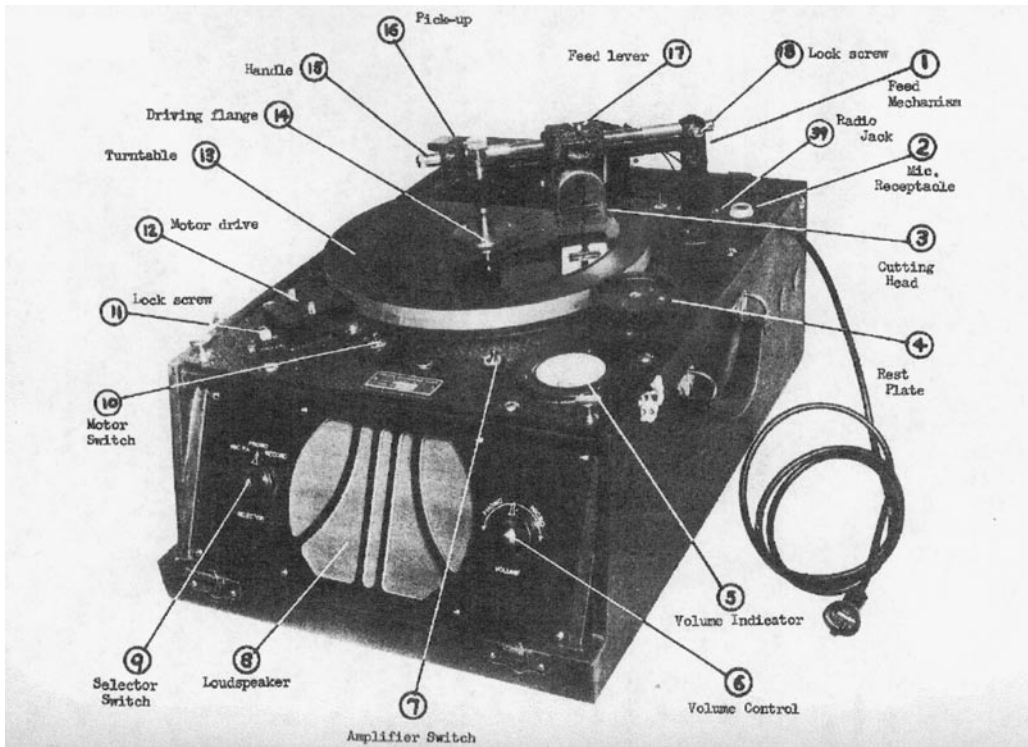
Meanwhile, John Work continued transcribing, and the Fisk field workers continued collecting data. Samuel Adams wrote Dr. Johnson on January 8, 1942:

Lost Delta Found

Family schedules and musician questionnaires have been filled out for all of the rural families for an area of about seven miles. (All of the Negro plantation families between the school and the city, a distance of about 4 1/2 miles; and all of the families for about 3 miles going in the other direction from the school.) Not including work done previously, up to date forty families have been contacted. In addition to the filling out of the family schedules and musical questionnaires, an inquiry has been made and information secured from individuals on folk stories, tales, songs, folk practices, religious practices and on general plantation poverty and folk practices in regard to midwivry. It is felt that within another week the King and Anderson Plantation area can be completed.⁴⁸

Four days later, Adams wrote again, revealing a sense of the students' living conditions. They'd completed another fourteen reports. "At present we are living with a Mr. Downs here at the school. We have lived here with him for a period of three weeks due to the fact that since Mr. Wright and his son have married they require the use of their home. At present Mr. Downs does not fully appreciate the arrangement. He has been nice, congenial, and cooperative, but he complains of not being able to sleep due to the fact that he has two other people bunking together in his bed with him, and at first the matter of the electric light burning late at night."⁴⁹

Six months after the first Coahoma trip, Lomax filed a report on the Library's work with Fisk. It reads, in its entirety:



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March 2, 1942. Archive of American Folk-song, Music
Secretary's Office
Dear Miss Caton:

In cooperation with the Fisk University Departments of Sociology and Music, the Archive made a trip to Coahoma County, Mississippi, last summer and recorded there about twenty 16-inch slow speed records of Negro music including many items which will eventually be published by the Archive in record form. This trip was preparatory to an exhaustive investigation of the folklore of this county by Fisk research workers.

On the way back to Washington, according to plan, I stopped to record some of the best ballad singers of the Virginia mountain area, obtaining from them also much material which is being used in our publication of folk songs.

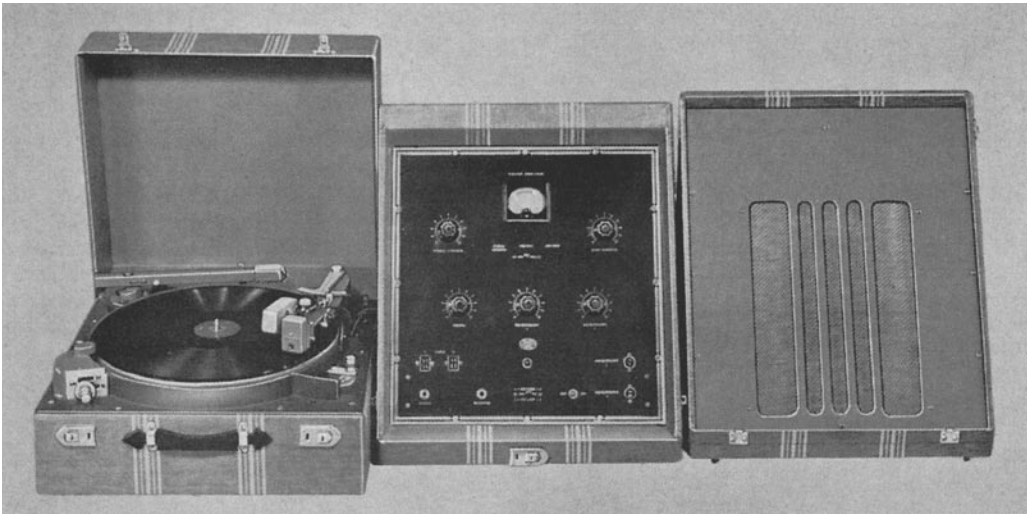
Respectfully yours,

AL

Assistant in Charge

Archive of American Folk Song

Lomax also had some accounting to take care of. To receive reimbursement for payments to artists in 1941, Lomax needed witnessed chits, and he'd neglected to procure them during the



(Opposite): Presto Model D disc recorder. This was a portable 12" turntable model complete with built-in amplifier and speaker. John Work used the Fisk machine for the Sacred Harp and subsequent field recordings as well as student recitals and Jubilee Singers rehearsals at the University. (Above): Presto Model Y disc recorder. Model Y was a bulky component system with a 16" turntable, amplifier, and monitor speaker. The Library of Congress' unit had a modified power supply that could operate from either alternating current or batteries, allowing it to run off a wall circuit or a car battery. Courtesy of Alan Graves, personal collection, www.televiar.com/grshome

trip.⁵⁰ Around March 10 he sent copies of these chits to John Work for witnessing, and Work passed them along to Lewis Jones and John Ross for signatures.⁵¹ Lomax had waited seven and a half months to tend to this errand, but ten days later, on March 20, he sent a note to Dr. Johnson asking him to hurry the matter and blaming the Fisk professors for the delay: “The whole darned United States Accounting Office and the war effort are being held up by this procrastination.”⁵²

Lomax received his signatures and his money but he did not expedite matters when others needed help. On March 17, Lomax sent Muddy Waters a form notifying him of the inclusion of “Can’t Be Satisfied” and “Country Blues” in a Library of Congress album, for which Muddy would receive a twenty-dollar check. Muddy wrote Lomax three letters over the next ten weeks inquiring about his money. (“I. thought I. wood write you all about my check I. am. still , wating on it but I haven got any answer from. you all.”⁵³) Nine months after being told of his recompense, Muddy received the promised two copies of the record; while there is no record of the payment, Muddy remembered receiving a twenty-dollar check.⁵⁴

By the second week in July 1942, the return trip to Coahoma County was imminent. Lomax arrived in Nashville on the thirteenth and spent the evening with Work, reviewing his Nashville area recordings. These included sides by the fiddle and banjo team Frank Patterson and Nathan Frazier who had appeared at Fisk’s seventy-fifth anniversary program. Another of the thirteen discs contained a sermon, “Dry Bones in the Valley,” which was prefaced with the song “Don’t Let Nobody Turn You ’Round,” sung by Nashville’s Fairfield Four, a quartet that would go on to fame on network radio and records. Lomax’s notes indicate no recognition of the significance of any of the music Work collected. “Rest of evening with John Work getting his records ready for deposit and trying to work out his problems—mostly of incompetence, laziness and lack of initiative on his part. Violently hot all day in this filthy and ugly old town.”⁵⁵

By midday Thursday, August 16, Lomax was headed to Memphis—without John Work or Lewis Jones. Work was not expected, but Jones’s absence is more peculiar. The tension between Lomax and Jones is evident in Lomax’s field notebook, in which Lomax writes, “Lewis Jones at 12 o’clock refused to begin the trip with me to Coahoma, deciding to wait now until Sat morning. More and more convinced he really resents me.”⁵⁶ By the seventeenth Lomax was in the Delta, and by the nineteenth Jones, with Fisk music student William Allen (who owned the car) and a student observer Margaret Just Wormley in tow, had joined him.

For the rest of July and the first half of August, the crew worked the Delta. Lomax etched seventy-six discs with blues, hollers, sermons, spirituals, gospel songs, quill (panpipes) tunes, ballads, and stories. John Work did join Lomax for a week (July 26–30) in the middle of the trip, and was present when Muddy Waters and his family filled out the general musical questionnaire.

Lewis Jones and his students continued the statistical and ethnographic study of the towns and plantations in the area. On August 15, after recording a fife and drum picnic, the frazzled group—“the dust and heat and fatigue finally got me,” Lomax wrote in his notes—headed back to Nashville.⁵⁷ John Work had spent most of his summer there, teaching educator’s sessions to support his extended family for which he had assumed responsibility after his parents’ deaths. He also spent time composing and arranging music, which would garner him both Composer’s Guild awards and the honor of directing the world-famous Fisk Jubilee Singers.

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If he had spent some time that summer pondering his role in a project that he'd conceived and been virtually evicted from, he may have received some solace in thinking of his mentor Dr. Herzog. Herzog's methodology in comparative musicology, according to Jeff Titon, "recognized a distinction between the collector or traveler who gathered the music, and the scholar or scientist (and this is how Work must increasingly have seen his role) who transcribed and analyzed it and prepared it for publication. He may have regarded Lomax's role as principally that of collector, not as scholar—and in so thinking he would have been exactly right. Work probably regarded his scholarship, and the published work that was to come out of it, as pre-eminent and far more important than Lomax's collection of the material. Indeed, Lomax was incapable of Work's kind of scholarship, and Work knew it."⁵⁸

With the fieldwork completed, preparation for the monograph began immediately. On July 24, 1942, President Jones wrote Work: "In accord with our recent conversation, I understand that you will put into shape for publication the results of the Coahoma County folk music study." Work responded on August 18 with a detailed plan for transcribing the records, correlating the interviews with the music, interpreting the gathered materials, conferencing with other authorities in the field of folk song, and editing and assembling the book. He received authorization from Fisk on September 22 to begin the task.

On October 7, however, a proprietary dispute began: "I am still not clear as to what role the Library of Congress is to have in the completion of the study," Lomax wrote Fisk's president. "Our investment in the project was a considerable one and I should be embarrassed to make a report on the basis of the plan attached to your letter of September 22. It is not clear where the editorial supervision of the project should lie or how the monograph should be laid out."⁵⁹

President Jones responded to Lomax, October 19, 1942: "I have discussed with Messrs. Johnson and Work the cooperative relations that can and should exist between the three agencies in developing this volume. I think we have a general understanding and there is no disposition, I am sure, on the part of any one to take advantage of the other." Note Jones's reference to "three agencies"—Lomax earlier had nominated himself and Charles S. Johnson as authors. It must have become apparent to Johnson and President Jones that a musicologist—a third agency—was needed.

Further, Johnson was not likely interested in putting his name on the Coahoma study. Though musically compelling, the trip's sociology was not up to his standards. Only one hundred plantation families were surveyed for the project; for *Shadow of the Plantation* (1934), Johnson questioned 600 families. From 1938 to 1940, Johnson directed a survey of over 2,200 black youth of eight counties across five states; the data became the basis for *Growing Up in the Black Belt* (1941).⁶⁰

Labor continued. The Library began duplicating 196 twelve-inch acetates from 1942. Fisk developed a folk culture seminar, calling in their most prestigious faculty members as guest instructors, including Professor Thomas Talley from the chemistry department, author of *Negro Folk Rhymes (Wise and Otherwise)* (1922), and George Pullen Jackson, professor of German at Peabody University, author of *White Spirituals in the Southern Uplands* (1933). Ten students

signed on for the course of nineteen seminars, ranging from “Characteristics of a Folk Culture” to “Dance Music and the Blues,” which covered “Sex and love in the culture. The family pattern and love-making conventions. The red light district.”⁶¹

Late in October, Fisk’s president learned by happenstance of Lomax’s departure from the Library of Congress, and thus from the project. Jones was writing to arrange a meeting during a forthcoming trip to Washington D.C. The meeting was held with Dr. Harold Spivacke, the Library’s Chief of the Division of Music, and recapitulated in a letter from Spivacke to Jones in November. The body of the letter is six numbered points. The first is: “All relations between Fisk University and the Library of Congress in connection with the Coahoma County Study are to be between us personally for the time being at least.” Point two: “For the present it does not seem necessary to set up an advisory committee, but consultants will be called in from time to time as needed.” Dr. Charles S. Johnson had long been removed and Lomax was gone from the project. Lewis Jones was preparing for his military induction. Only Work kept his eye on the ball and kept it moving forward. He continued transcribing the discs, taking notes on their contents and meaning. He is the subject of point five: “Dr. Work is to submit samples of his transcriptions.” The heads of the institutions were not sure what to make of the project, but they clutched it close.

Work was relishing his task. Four days before Spivacke’s letter was written, Work sent President Jones a five page memo reporting on his transcription progress, including the completion of all the records from 1941. Most interesting is his commentary on technique, which shows a devotion to the actual and not the romanticized: “With my assistant Mr. Harry Wheeler, we have transcribed 20 spirituals, 2 blues, a sermon by Rev. Ch. H. Savage, and a prayer. In transcribing the spirituals I made an earnest effort to transcribe the songs just as they were sung—not as I thought they ought to be sung . . . It is more important however to recognize that these sermon-poems are intoned. And the audience’s response to these is due more to the preacher’s tone and the pitch than to the words. Therefore, I point with a great deal of pride to our transcription in musical notes of the folk sermon recorded at the Mt. Ararat church. To do this accurately and comprehensibly required practically all of three weeks.”⁶²

Work was also moving toward his interpretation of the data: “I have studied or am in the process of reading these new books: *Father of the Blues* (Handy), *Our Singing Country* (Lomax), *Lanterns on the Levee* (Percy), *Folk Songs of the South* (Cox), *Slave Songs from the Georgia Coast* (Parrish), *Folk Songs of Mississippi* (Hudson), and magazine articles.”⁶³

Professor Work continued on his tasks, submitting to President Jones on February 10, 1943 samples of his transcriptions and two essays. Jones sent a copy to Mr. Spivacke. In June 1943, Jones met twice with the Library in D. C. In July, John Work was nearly done with his manuscript. In a report to Jones, he wrote that this would

consist of 158 transcriptions of folk songs; a folk sermon found among the Negroes of Coahoma County; a catalogue of the disposition of the records (whether transcribed or not); and a treatise consisting of 10 chapters, bibliography, two indexes (general and classified); a biographical appendix; and a preface describing the transcribing process.

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I received from the Library of Congress 196 duplicate recordings of folk material gathered by Mr. Lewis Jones and Mr. Alan Lomax in the summer of 1942 . . . I am reasonably sure that for the first time a Negro folk sermon was transcribed in its musical symbols . . .

Last month [June 1943], I went back to Clarksdale for the purpose of interviews to fill in certain gaps in the materials and to obtain some pictures of Delta scenery . . . I believe that the Mississippi Folklore Project will prove to be more and more important. Unquestionably we have the most important and comprehensive Negro folk music collection in America (or in the world probably) except that in the Library of Congress . . . Also we have preserved, by a stroke of good fortune much valuable Negro music and speech that due to the disruption of the Negro rural life in the South by the war might have been lost forever.⁶⁴

By the end of July 1943, Work had turned in his manuscript and transcriptions, and was already considering changes. Work wrote President Jones on July 30:

In studying the treatise on the Mississippi folklore project which I have submitted to you, you will observe that there is no introductory chapter describing the organization of the project with reference to the valuable contributions to it made by the Library of Congress and Fisk University. Also none of the essays I have written attempts to present the sociological background of the area studied. I felt that the first should be written by you or some person whom you might designate to write it.

Mr. Lewis Jones has written the sociological part and while his organization principle is at variance with mine, I do not believe it is in conflict with mine. Such differences, or duplications which might occur could be easily harmonized I feel, if the project is to evolve as a one-book affair. If it is to become a two-book project, my volume would need a preface.⁶⁵

The Lewis Jones manuscript is, indeed, simply his thirty-two page introduction tacked onto John Work's manuscript, minus Work's indexes and transcriptions. (The longhand versions of much of Work's paper are in his microfilm files at Fisk.)

The project seemed on course for a grand finish. But within two months, the bungling had begun. The Library's Botkin wrote to John Work on September 21, 1943: "No one here seems to know anything about the manuscript which you say President Jones was to have brought to Washington in July." It was soon recovered, though only briefly: "Your completed manuscript reached me only a few weeks ago and I have not had a chance to go over it thoroughly," Botkin wrote Work on November 10. "The Library has by no means lost interest in the project but the project has lost two of its collaborators, Alan Lomax, who is too busy, and Lewis Jones who, I understand, is in the Army . . . I still think the main job, which is one of correlating a large body of diversified data into a unified whole, still lies ahead." Dr. Spivacke wrote Work that same day, assuring Work that his interest in the manuscript was not diminished, and that he awaited Dr. Botkin's report on the paper and his own opportunity to read it.⁶⁶

The paper trail then drops off dramatically. Lewis Jones, who had been inducted into the

army on October 13, 1943, served until October 8, 1945. On November 23, 1945, the Fisk graduate student Samuel Adams submitted his thesis *Technology, Secularization, and the Rural Negro*. Three weeks later, President Jones received a letter from Duncan Emrich, the new chief at the Library's Archive of American Folk Song: "I have recently assumed the position left vacant by Dr. Botkin . . . The manuscript being prepared by Dr. John Work . . . seems to have been left at somewhat loose ends . . . We do not have a copy of the manuscript."⁶⁷

President Jones wrote Emrich on December 26, 1945: "It was expected that Mr. [Lewis] Jones's study would be integrated with that made by Mr. Work and a volume brought out under either the auspices of Fisk University or the Library of Congress; or jointly. As both Mr. Jones and Mr. Lomax were inducted into the armed forces, Mr. Work completed the first draft of the manuscript which was submitted to Messrs. Botkin and Spivacke for review and suggestions as to what could be done with the study. Neither of these gentlemen were able to do anything about it at the time so the matter rested there. I plan to come East in January and hope I may have a full talk with you regarding the completion of the study, if this seems advisable."⁶⁸

Record of the project stopped for two more years, resuming December 18, 1947, when Lomax first attempted to exploit the research himself. He wrote Work requesting permission to "bring a portable machine and copy off some of the material I need from the Coahoma recordings." Work, whose manuscript had been mishandled, apparently inquired as to the purposes of the copies, for Lomax replied on January 2, 1948:⁶⁹ "Dear Mr. Work: I believe you know why I want to get copies of the Coahoma records. I need the material for a book on which I am presently engaged. The records are not suitable for commercial exploitation and that is not my interest in them."

Lomax's book was completed five decades later, during which time many of the recordings made in Coahoma County found their way onto commercial releases, legal and otherwise. The first usage was a year after the first trip, when Lomax included Muddy Waters in a Library of Congress album of 78 RPM discs. In the 21st century, musicians have experimented with some of the recordings, adding rhythms, beats, and other instruments.⁷⁰ Among the more prominent artists recorded are bluesmen Son House, Willie Brown, David "Honeyboy" Edwards, and Muddy Waters; fife and drum leader Sid Hemphill, and gospel singer Bozie Sturdivant of the Silent Grove Baptist Church.

Alan Lomax contributed greatly to our knowledge of American culture. He made great field recordings. His immense legacy of recordings is testament to his negotiation of circumstances—in domestic and international cultures. The intensity of the performances confirms the intimacy he created for the recording situation.

When Lomax published his book in 1993, John Work was mentioned three times: in the preface, he was mentioned in association with the musical transcriptions; in the sole text mention, he was present at the recording of Muddy Waters; in the acknowledgments, his name is listed with Jones and Adams. Adams is not otherwise mentioned; Jones, who is cited several times, is the only one portrayed as an actual participant in the research.

When Lewis Jones and John Work were cobbling together the "final report," Adams's manuscript was not yet written. However, Adams did have access to the Jones and Work writings,

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and he employs—without attribution—the River, Railroad, and Highway metaphors that Jones had been using since at least 1942. To a modern, proprietary eye, it is surprising that Adams would use another’s work without citing the source. However, Jones was Adams’s teacher; they both worked in the specialized field of social science at Fisk, where a spirit of cooperative scholarship would have been imperative. It’s all but inconceivable that Adams was trying to get away with anything.

But fifty years later, when Lomax published *Land Where the Blues Began*, his audience would have had no idea about his sources. Adams’s text was available to Lomax who, in *Land*, used photographs of the Dipsie Doodle and a hand drawn map of a Clarksdale neighborhood, both of which first appeared in Adams’s master’s thesis. Lomax does not attribute his source. (Lomax also used Work’s photograph of a sharecropper’s cabin, unattributed; Work’s handwriting can be seen bleeding through.) In much the same way that Lomax reconfigured the population and cultural expression of Coahoma County by focusing on the uneducated artists over more educated spokespeople, by favoring “tradition”—spirituals—over an authentic presentation of current church practice, he disavowed the community of scholars that worked with him. (See Editors’ Introduction to the John Work manuscript). As Adams, Jones, and Work repeatedly make clear, Coahoma County was a diverse community that included educated black Southerners able to articulate their ideas about their home. By devaluing their contributions, by emphasizing the culture of powerful but less articulate artists that he—Lomax—is required to “explain” or “interpret” for mainstream America, by not citing the major contributions of black Southern scholars who helped him with his work, Lomax creates an appealing but static and nostalgic portrait of black Southern America.

Coahoma County was a vital, active, and evolving world. Several of the Fiskites wrote optimistically of the expected results of their work, and though nothing of the study was published during their lifetimes, their expectations—a basis for contemporary music history, a new approach to folk music, a working knowledge of the musical life of people—were not incorrect. There are many details, facts, and descriptions that may have been lost without the study, including Work’s discussion of Charles Haffer’s broadsides. The early musicological analyses seem almost prescient—especially Work’s focus on the songs “John Henry,” “Frankie and Albert,” and “Stagolee.” The graduate seminar based on the study’s findings brought together many of the area’s most prominent African-American academics, creating a think tank that must have sent ripples throughout the world of African-American cultural study, arming a new generation for the task of research and analysis.

Every bit as important as what went on back in Nashville and Washington D. C., was the effect of the researchers’ presence on the Delta people. These rural citizens, with little money and little means for travel or communication beyond the distance of a field holler, lived in isolation. Seeing their lives as the focus of study by outsiders must have heartened many individuals, validating their culture and affirming their way of life. The outsiders’ presence surely had that impact on Muddy Waters, who felt that if he were important enough to be recorded in Mississippi, he might be talented enough to make a career in Chicago. As its creators hoped, this study did mark a turning point in the appreciation of African-American culture.

Lost Delta Found

History has been indifferent to John Wesley Work III. His ideas and initiative, his research and analysis have been appropriated by others, his contribution not acknowledged. In the texts of Alan Lomax, John Work is barely mentioned. Work's personal field recordings—those other than from the Coahoma Study—have seen only pitiable release: the occasional Library of Congress issue, a small folk collection here and there. Several were released as part of Rounder Records' "Alan Lomax Collection." Those not deposited in the Library of Congress are in the archives of the Center for Popular Music, Middle Tennessee State University.

After Dr. John Work died from a heart attack in 1967, his widow Edith maintained his personal papers and recordings in their Nashville home. Mrs. Work engaged Fisk archivist Beth Howse to organize and microfilm most of the paper items. When Mrs. Work became ill in the late 1980s, the collection was stored in a commercial storage facility. There, it was inadvertently lost. Fortunately, Work's manuscript and all of his 158 transcriptions had been preserved on microfilm in the Fisk Library's Special Collections.

Sixty years may have passed since these manuscripts were intended for publication, but the information is right on time. Today, as casinos dot the land and satellite antennae take Delta inhabitants far from their shotgun houses without having to leave their sofas, their culture is changed. This record of the historical past helps us see how the past lives in the present, and also how that past came to be.